



PORTRAYAL OF DEATH IN THE POEMS OF SAROJINI NAIDU AND EMILY DICKINSON: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Yugal Jyoti Borah¹, Dr. Deepa Phukan Baruah²

¹Research Scholar (English), Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

²Research Guide (English), Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya

ABSTRACT :

Death is one of the most fascinated subjects in literature. The modern writers often present death from various angles- as an existential dilemma, as terrible anxiety and as mysterious subject involved with human being. However, death is identified as natural phase of decay and renewal. As far as the literary expression about death is concerned, it can be said that death in literature is as old as literature itself. Both Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson have written a number of poems on the theme of death. Sarojini's poems on death are marked by optimism and heroic spirit though it is missing in all her poems on these themes as a poet cannot be as consistent as a philosopher. She is fully aware of the challenge of suffering and pain and death to life but she is not afraid of them. Some of the poems written by Sarojini Naidu explore the themes of mortality and the desire to prolong life. Her poems on death explore her longing to know the mystery of death. Emily Dickinson has composed more about 500 poems with the theme of death. She used to search for the universal truth about human life, death, immortality, God, faith and place of human being in universe. In these poems she tries to focus death from philosophical point of view. Sometimes death carries extraordinary fascination and mystery for her, which signifies not only despair and terror but also rest and peace.

Keywords: *Death, immortality, religion, mystery.*

I.Introduction:

Death is apparently the end of life, the terminus of physical being, and of things known and recognized by sense and feeling. It is very clearly depicted by Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson through their poems. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was the pioneer poetess who is recognized for her remarkable contribution in the arena of Indian English poetry. She was one of the poets who belonged to the pre-independence era. She had mastered the language of the colonizers and used it brilliantly to write poetry goaded with sophisticated style and perfection.



Her first volume of poetry *The Golden Threshold* (1905), was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912), and in 1914 she was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her collected poems, all of which she wrote in English, have been published under the titles *The Sceptred Flute* (1928) and *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961).

One of the powerful themes in Naidu's poetry was Death. Naidu wrote remarkable lyrics on the theme of Death depicting Death as the ultimate Truth. Naidu's poems on the theme of Death are powerful assertions.

Emily Dickinson was one of the most influential poets in American Literature. She has written more about 1700 poems on the various themes like love, nature, death and immortality etc. She carried a tragic vision filled with pain and suffering throughout her life. A melancholic note run throughout her poems based on death and immortality. The non-stop untimely loss of her family members and friends have added to her tragic plight. It should be noted that Dickinson's mind is always haunted by the fear of death and this immensely coloured her vision of life. Thus, Dickinson's faith in the sanctity of the material life suffered a severe set-back.

The proposed paper attempts to focus a comparative discussion on the poems of Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson written on the theme of Death.

II. Objectives of the Study:

- To give an idea about death poems of Sarojini Naidu.
- To give an idea on death poems of Emily Dickinson.
- To attempt a comparative study of the death poems of Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson.

III. Methodology:

The study is based on descriptive method. Need base secondary data are collected from books, journals and web sources.

IV. Results and Discussion:

Sarojini Naidu used to write poetry on various range of themes, including patriotism, romance, tragedy, social and political issues, and women's rights. Her poetry reflects a harmonious blend of romanticism and nationalism, where she masterfully crafted verses that resonated with both emotion and patriotic fervour. Naidu's use of vivid imagery, metaphorical



richness, and a musical cadence imbued her verses with a unique charm, earning her acclaim as one of the prominent figures in Indian English poetry. Her ability to traverse seamlessly between themes of love and nationhood showcased a versatile pen that contributed significantly to the literary landscape of her time. Other than Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, it was Naidu who helped sustain the foundations of Indian English Literature in its early years.

Sarojini Naidu has mentioned death as one them the mystic silence that men call death' (The Bird of time). She also shows an anguished awareness of the ravages of Time and the inevitability of Death. Sarojini's preoccupation with death was in a generalized way: the poetic imagination looking for theme to play with. For viewed in a larger context of the tenor, temper and texture of her poetry, death appears more as theme or a prop to creativity and life than a concern percolating her imagery, aesthetic: and metaphysics as in the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

To Sarojini death remained a mystery that haunted her mind from the very beginning. She invokes time to unfold to her

“The fragment peace of the twilight's breath
And the mystic silence that men call death.” (The Sceptred Flute, p 65.)

Sarojini Naidu perceives death from different angles in different moods, and tries to capture the abstract feelings and emotions in palpable terms. Her vision of death as reflected in her poems is paradoxical. She considers death both a friend and a foe. She fears as well as we comes it. In the poem "Suttee" death is portrayed as a cruel person who with his lips has blown out the lamp of the individual's life and has made her life one of complete darkness.

But death is also a redeemer of pain and sorrow. The poet, thoroughly tom up in life, nourishes a desire to "Creep / o some dim shade and sink down to sleep." She has surrendered all that she possessed, and, and now she yeams for total peace and repose. Her soul will find rest only in death:

Let me depart, for my soul is wrung,
And all my cheerless orisons are sung;
Let me depart, with faint limbs letme creep
To come dim hade and sink me down to sleep. (The Sceptred Flute, p 37)



Sarojini Naidu expresses a mysterious longing for death some of her poems. In "Autumn Song" the poet is sad, weary and one because all her dreams and hopes have gone like the fluttering leaves in autumn and so why should she stay behind? She, too, shes to depart with this world:

My heart is weary and sad and alone,
For its dreams like the fluttering leaves have gone,
And why shoul I stay behind ? (The Sceptred Flute, p 23)

A more pronounced death wish is expressed in "Welcome". She welcomes pain, because it quickens her spirit. She welcomes death, because it is a source of peace, tranquility, and freedom from worldly bondage and pain. It will retrieve her from sorrow:

"Welcome, O tranquil Death I
Thou hast no ill to grieve me,
Who com' st with Freedom's breath
From sorrow to retrieve me."

Sarojini does not deny the reality of that last on aught on life, which lays waste whatever is beautiful in Nature, promising in the human personality. She accepts death in her ride, for to accept death is to accept life. In the philosophical analysis, life and death are not mighty opposites, rather two aspects the single reality. Though the shadow of death looms large, the poet is passionately in love with life. The beauty and brightness life always over power her. In "The Poet to Death" she defies d challenges death. She has a strange urge to live and enjoy passionately all the moments of pleasure and pain that come her way. 'r heart is swelling with unfulfilled longings of youth and she wishes to die only after their complete realization.

Sarojini Naidu perceives death as the last fulfillment of life. It promotes life from the plane of personality to that of a superior being. Death has enabled her soul to achieve a safe light to the bosom of the Real. In utter devotion to the Real, she attains the liberation of the self from the nescience engendered by time and mortality.

Death is the ultimate experience and supreme touchstone for Dickinson. It reveals ultimate truth or reality; it makes clear the true nature of God and the state of the soul. She



held the common Puritan belief that the way a person died indicated the state of his/her soul, a peaceful death being a sign of grace and harmony with God.

Emily Dickinson describes the different emotional responses that death has on human soul and mind and enables the readers to view death from a different perspective. The ambiguous meaning of death that Dickinson uses gives the audience a choice to have their own interpretations about death. Through the varying descriptions of death, the author explains the many types of death that individuals experience. Some of Dickinson's poems on death emphasize its physical aspects to illustrate the terrible emptiness which the soul's departure gives rise to. In this we may quote the poem "*I heard a Fly buzz – when I died*" (L, 465). Here, the persona is the one who is passing away and expresses the experience of dying:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm – (“Complete” lines 1 – 4)

The reader can associate stillness with death even in “the Air”. By describing her own death the speaker says that she hears the buzzing of a fly in the death-like atmosphere of the room. There is a pin-drop silence prevailing not only inside but also outside the room.

The poet presents death not as abstraction but a concrete reality. In “Because I could Not Stop for Death” she has personified death as a lover which frees man from the trouble of the material life: Because I could not stop for death,

He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

Here, the poem describes a spiritual journey that takes a person to eternity. She believes in the reality of death. She loves to deal with death in a very courageous manner in her poems. She identifies herself playfully with the dying sun in the evening. Dickinson, however, does describe death scenes. She realistically presents the attitudes and responses of the people around a dying person. Throughout her death poems Dickinson attempts to depict the world of death



and immortality with mystical elements. Her one of the best known poems “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain”(280) is an example of the mysticism of death. She expresses:

“I felt a funeral in my brain
And mourners to and fro
Kept treading- treading-till it’s seemed
That sense was breaking through”(p.128)

She grasps a funeral in her brain. Actually the poetic narration on after death has been happening in her imagination. We see a kind of spiritual development and the mystical world of death through death as depicted in the poem. Dickinson’s “Because I Could not Stop for Death”(712) is another notable poem where she divulges the mysticism in a unique way:

Because I could not stop for death-
He kindly stopped for me-
The carriage held by just ourselves-
And immortality.(p.350)

Here Dickinson explores the spiritual journey of the soul into the world of immortality. It’s a journey that is not really possible to think, but this journey is viable only from a Psychological point of view. Dickinson believes that death always helps a man to be free for an eternal life. The last four lines of the poem give notes of immortality and eternity-

“This centuries- and yet
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the Horses heads
Were toward eternity.”

Death is an integral part of life and this minimizes its fear in man's life. Death, a physically insurmountable and mentally incomprehensible phenomenon, is an evergreen source of anxiety for Dickinson. She has no hesitation in admitting that she cannot 'stay any longer in a world of death'. She is least afraid of death in her life because she has the first hand experience of death. She universalizes her dilemma of death by identifying it with the very process of creation.



Dickinson grapples with the mystery of death in a courageous manner. She is never evasive in her treatment of death. Death is not the end because life is continued after it. Therefore, death leads to immortality. Death cannot damage life because of its divine orientations. Dickinson believes in the continuity of the life of the soul even after death. She further comments that eternity can be realized through the death of death. She also calls death as the 'democratic death'.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE THEME OF DEATH IN SAROJINI NAIDU AND EMILY DICKINSON:

Death is the dominant theme in both Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson. The thought of death was the constant occupation of both the poets. There are some personal factors that account for Sarojini's preoccupation with death. Her own illness made her think a great deal about death and she often spoke as though she had been on the brink of it. Besides this, the death of her father and the best friend, Gopal Krishna Gokhale left her greatly shocked. Similarly, there are many reasons of Emily's preoccupation with death. She was made cruelly aware of its presence by the frequent loss of her dear friends. Some religious and literary factors are also responsible for her obsession with death. However, death in Sarojini's and Emily's poetry is an assumed attitude. Their preoccupation with death is imaginative rather than philosophical. Death becomes a spring board for their imagination and a challenge to their language.

Both Sarojini and Emily try to know the mystery of death. To Sarojini death remained a mystery that haunted her mind from the very beginning. She invokes time to unfold to her.

The fragrant peace of the twilight's breath
And the mystic pang that man call death. (The Bird of Time)

The poem "The Soul's Prayer" describes how the poet in her innocent pride asks God, the creator of human life, to reveal to her the mystery of "Thine inmost laws of life and death." God grants her prayer and tells her:

"I, bending from my sevenfold height
Will teach thee of My quickening grace,



Life is a prism of My light, And
Death the shadow of My face."(The Soul's Prayer)

To Emily death remained a mystery that haunted her mind from the very beginning and continued to do so till her death. In 1850 when she began her poetic career, the mystery of death attracted her and she considered it her poetic mission to probe into it in Poem 52: 11

“Whether my bark down at sea
Whether she met with gales
Whether to isles enchanted
She bent her docile sails”

Both Sarojini and Emily perceive death from different angles in different moods, and try to capture the abstract feelings and emotions in palpable terms. Both the poets have depicted death as a foe to mankind. Sarojini portrays death as a cruel person who with his lips has blown out the lamp of the persona's life (her husband) and made her life one of complete darkness. Her husband, the main support of her life, has been mercilessly crushed under the cruel foot of Death. Nothing can restore him to life or bring back his departed glory:

Tree of my life, Death's cruel foot
Hath crushed thee down to thy hidden root,
Nought shall restore thy glory fled ...
Shall the blossom live when the tree is dead?

In "Dirge" death has parted the persona from her husband, divested her of all the sweetness and happiness of her life and has given her the "yeaming pain of unfulfilled delight", the moonless vigils of lonely nights" and the deep" anguish of her tears".

Both Sarojini and Emily portray death as a great leveler in their poems. To Sarojini death is the mighty force which spares nobody. The ordinary and the great, the young and the old, the beggar and the king all are subjected to death. Death is the night which brings the end of all their journeyings:

Till we meet the Night that brings
Both to beggars and to kings
The end of all their journeying (Wandering Beggars)



Death as a great leveler is the theme of many of Emily's poems. All can equally enjoy the privilege to die " (Poem 536). "Death is the Wealth / Of the Poorest Bird" (Poem 1059). Death makes no distinction between man and man:

Colour Caste Denomination
These are Times Affair
Death's diviner classifying
Does not know they are
As in Sleep All Hue forgotten
Tenets put behind
Death's large Democratic fingers
Rub away the Brand (Poem 970, stanza 1-2-)

Both Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson depict the inevitability of death in their poems. In "Love and Death" Sarojini describes the persona's dream of her love conquering death, But when he wakes up, she finds that immortality conferred on love in her dream was merely an avanescent dream and that death is a negative force which is inevitable :

O Love, alas, that love could not assuage
The burden of thy human heritage,
Or save thee from the swift decrees of Death (Love and Death)

The inevitability of death is the theme of many of Death waits for all -'One dignity delays for all" Emily's poems. (Poem-98). We cannot detain the person from going away for ever (Poem-262). "All but Death," she says, "can be Adjusted" because "Death unto itself Exception -/ Is exempt from Change"-(749).

In many poems both sarojini and Emily perceive death as a way to heaven or immortality. To Sarojini death is not the end of life but the transcendent flight from hope to hope, from height to heavenier height in which a man's soul is lost in the rapture of the cosmic soul. In Salutation to My Father's Spirit "Life is like a burning veil" that keeps the lovers' "yeaming souls apart" and the persona hopes that after death she can live with her lover eternally in the dim, undivided sleep of death: Therefore, she should not lament her lover's death :

"If you were dead I should not weep
How sweetly would our hearts unite



In a dim, undivided sleep,
Locked in Death's deep and narrow night,
All anger fled, all sorrow past, O Love, at last. (If You Were Dead)

For Sarojini Naidu Death is a way to heaven or immortality, There- is welcomed as a mysterious portal through which the soul goes in search of Love Immortal:

Open, O Vast Unknown Thy sealed mysterious portal!
I go to seek mine own, Vision of Love Immortal.(Welcome)

Emily Dickinson also perceives death as a way to heaven or immortality. Death, she says, is "Our rapt attention/ Immortality" (p. 97). As she cannot find her dead friend upon the mortal side" thinks that he must have gone to heaven (poem 150). The "Majesty of Death" invests the dead with "Everlasting Robes" (Poem 171). Poem 665 describes as a journey to immortality:

Dropped into the Ether Acre
Wearing the Sod Gown
Bonnet of Everlasting Laces
Brooch frozen on

Horses of Blonde and Coach of Silver
Baggage a strepped pearl
Journey of Down-and whip of Diamond-
Riding to meet the Ear. (Poem 665)

There are, however, certain aspects that have been taken by Sarojini Naidu but Emily Dickinson has not depicted them. Sarojini defies and challenges death in many poems. In The Poet Death" the poet has a strange urge to live and enjoy passionately al the moments of pleasure and pain that come her way. She Does not fear death, rather challenges it. But in "Because I could not stop for Death", Emily Dickinson has perceived death as a gentleman-suitor who takes the persona an a carriage-drives:

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me



The Carriage held but just
Ourselves And Immortality. (p. 712)

Emily Dickinson tries to define death in terms of its effect on the dying person and displays great poetic gift in capturing the moment of death in terms of the condition and behavior of the dying person. She also captures the moment when one has almost touched death but has luckily escaped by a hair's breadth. In Poem 160 the persona feels "the world go by" at the moment of death. It is a moment when she touches the shore of eternity, and then falls back. The endearing power of death is the theme of some poems. Death enhances our love for the dead whose going away from us paradoxically brings them nearer to us (Poem 88)." Death Sets a thing significant" (Poem 360), and our love for the dead is 'Augmented.. a Hundred fold" (Poem 482).

V. Conclusion:

The study reveals that both Sarojini Naidu and Emily Dickinson have displayed great genius in writing poem on death and immortality. Both of them have explored the different aspects of these themes and have expressed their poetic experience in different shades and moods. Again, both of them have used poetic devices in various ways to infuse their lyrics with their emotional and lyrical intensity. It is very surprising to find so many points of similarity in their poems on death and immortality. It is hoped that the present comparative study of these two great poets of two different countries will contribute towards greater understanding and appreciation of these two great poets.

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